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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the use of Augusto Boal's model of participatory theater to analyze complex social issues within the context of teacher education coursework. Augusto Boal was the originator of the Theatre of the Oppressed. The study examined the multicultural realities of school and evaluated students' use of Boal to discover further potential for using his theater. Students were introduced to Boal's theater for three reasons: to examine various solutions to societal questions found in schools; to develop critical thinking strategies for classroom dilemmas; and to articulate diversity in perspective taking. Students (1) kept reflective journals that responded to educational issues presented by readings, classroom discussions, and observations; (2) participated in various classroom activities that developed critical thinking strategies (e.g., simultaneous dramaturgy, image theater, and theater as discourse); and (3) used a constructivist model for working with Boal's theater in the classroom. The process allowed students to assess their choice of roles (either spectator or participant) in the multicultural drama found in the reality of school life. As a result of the participatory experience, authors and students could reflect within a safe environment about what makes the world a place to live and be happy in, rather than just a vast market in which people sell their goods. The authors concluded that encouraging the participatory theater process allows for the potential of endless reflection concerning perspective taking, posing questions, and examining solutions. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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Boal's Mirror: Reflections for Teacher Education

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Abstract

In schools within the Los Angeles area, as in most settings, there will always be societal questions that require answers. Augusto Boal, the originator of the Theatre of the Oppressed, which examines real-life situations, states, "It is time for a theater which, at its best, will ask the right questions at the right times." For the authors of this study, the "right question" became: "How can we use Boal's model of participatory theater to discuss and to analyze complex social issues within the context of teacher education coursework?". The purpose of the study became twofold: (a) to examine the multicultural realia of school; and (b) to evaluate the students' use of Boal as a way to discover further potential for use of his theater. The resulting process that informed the purpose gave the research participants an opportunity to assess their choice of roles - either spectator or participant - in the multicultural drama found in the reality of school life.

As a result of the participatory experience, the authors and the students were able to reflect within a safe environment about what "makes this world a place to live and be happy in. . . rather than just a vast market in which we sell our goods and our souls" (1992, p.247). The authors concluded that encouraging such a process allows for the potential of endless reflections concerning perspective taking, posing questions, and examining solutions. We became an active part of the democratization of education process.

Introduction

The process of using Boal's work as a means for developing reflective teachers began several years ago when two teacher education faculty members decided to meet weekly to discuss their applications of critical pedagogy in their teacher education coursework. The respective syllabi and course content goals of the two faculty members already included: (a) a basic survey of the social and political contexts of education; (b) a study of reading and language arts curriculum methodology in culturally and linguistically diverse elementary school settings; (c) a seminar dialogue for student teachers with urban placements in the Los Angeles area; and (d) interactive collaborative models for processing course content. The mutual inquiry continued with an increasing commitment to the engagement of their students in active, reflective, and critical discussions of societal reality.

In their weekly meetings, the authors began to examine the work of Augusto Boal and his Theatre of the Oppressed. They found that his theater offered a logical arena of inquiry that could provide teacher preparation students with a meaningful process to become thoughtful and active co-participants in the theater of their school community. In particular, the use of Boal's work created a stimulating opportunity to examine the vast array of real-life theatre in the social-political realities of the cultural diversity of urban life. The authors became committed to Boal's idea that "theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it " (1992, p. xxxi).

The purpose for the students' introduction to Boal's theater became threefold: (a) to examine varieties of solutions for societal questions found in school settings; (b) to develop critical thinking strategies for classroom dilemmas; and (c) to articulate diversity in perspective taking.

Review of Literature

The word *theater* is derived from the Greek word *thea* meaning to see or to view. Since the inception of the theater experience in Greece over two thousand years ago, this classical experience has been used to critically examine life. However, Augosto Boal believes that gradually the free expression to examine life experiences within theater was thwarted:

> In the beginning the theater was the dithyrambic song: free people singing in the open air . . . Later, the ruling classes took possession of the theater and built their dividing walls. First, they divided the people, separating actors from spectators: people who act and people who watch - the party is over! (1985, p.119).

Within the last 20 years, Augusto Boal has returned to the original participatory theatrical experience as a way to examine daily societal experience: ". . . the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theater is action!" (p. 155).

Boal believes that any attempt to separate theater from societal dilemmas is an error. Consequently, he views the theater as a potent means to find solutions to societal questions, while examining multiple perspectives within the process. Within the current decade, Boal has summarized his view as follows:

> . . . when so many certainties have become so many doubts, when so many dreams have withered on exposure to sunlight, and so many hopes have become as many deceptions - now that we are living through times and situations of great perplexity, full of doubts and uncertainties, now more than ever I believe it is time for a theatre which, at its best, will ask the right questions at the right times. Let us be democratic and ask our audiences to tell us their desires, and let us show them alternatives. Let us hope that one day - please, not too far in the future - we'll be able to convince our governments, our leaders, to do the same; to ask their audiences - US - what they should do, so as to make this world a place to live and be happy in - yes, it is possible - rather than just a vast market in which we sell our goods and our souls. (Boal, 1992. p. 247)

Freire and Boal

Closely aligned with Boal's thinking, Paolo Freire (1988) used theater in education as a method to engage students in activities that empowered them. For example, with the guidance of a facilitator, Freire used the process in adult literacy programs in Brazil. With critically engaged eyes, his students began to view social and political situations in a way that resulted in a new awareness of self-hood and of how "men (can) teach each other, mediated by the world" (1988, p. 67). As in Boal's thinking, individuals using Freire's philosophy become active participants rather than passive spectators as they manipulate the societal politics of real-life situations.

Constructivism and Boal

Constructivism can be defined as an approach to learning in which the individual "actively engages with the environment and builds his or her own knowledge and understanding" (Feinburg & Mindess, 1994, p. 7). Educators using the constructivist paradigm consider learning a coercive process unless students are active participants. Vygotsky's constructivist theory (1978) (Moll, 1995) and Noddings' work in her studies of the ethics of care in education (1992) are examples of current recognition of the practice. Both clearly address the necessity for valuing individual experience as an authentic and central focus of the learning process.

Not surprisingly, Freire used the constructivist approach in his literacy work in Brazil:

> Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the art of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. (Freire, 1988, p. 52)

Similarly, Boal interpreted the constructivist approach in his work in the necessary role of the participants as actors rather than spectators. This role becomes

the crucial ingredient in his process of thought and action.

Despite the potential significance of Boal's ideas for teacher education, there is a paucity of literature referring to the use of Boal's thinking in exploring the role of his organized participatory exercises in the field. In an effort to fill this void, the present study was undertaken.

Overview of the Study

A qualitative study design was developed to explore Boal's process and at the same time, to attempt to build critical consciousness of the realities of the diverse perspectives represented in educational theory and practice. The authors included the following student activities in their coursework for this process: (a) a reflective journal that responded to educational issues presented by readings, classrooms discussions, observations; (b) a series of classroom activities that developed critical thinking strategies; and (c) a constructivist model for the use of Boal's theater in the classroom.

The Reflective Journals

As a basis for weekly journaling, students wrote about different perspectives concerning a question, situation, or case study introduced by the instructor. After the first two weeks of class, these dialogue journals became the basis for using Boal's theater exercises in the reenactment of the experiences.

The following student comments concerning this approach emerged from their reflective journals:

> I'm so glad the issue of the debate on bilingual education was addressed in class. To present it in theater form was interesting. I think it allowed a comfort zone which allowed for dialogue.

> I found the class discussion and demonstration interesting and eye opening. . . I think it is a system that could be applied to every expect of an individual's life on a daily basis. I know that I will attempt to

incorporate this idea in my daily critical thinking.

> We have all been spectators. In good consciousness we need to be active spectators, which ends up making us participants in the drama. . . by doing nothing we are doing something, we are perpetuating the problem.

The Classroom Activities

Overview. After the first two weeks, exercises from Boal's Theater of the Oppressed were used for the beginning of each class. Reenactment of a real-life experience in the classroom was suggested as a result of the reflections in the journal writing which served as basis for the exercises.

Following the initial presentations that used Boal's Forum Theater Model, small group analyses of responses to the enactment were discussed. Formats were then suggested within the context of Boal's participatory theatre process of redesigning and reformatting the scenes. The scenes were then performed again, using the suggestions. The repeated scene was then discussed in small groups and analyzed by the entire class.

For example, using the theater of Boal, the students in the authors' courses were invited to actively participate in an examination of the bilingual debate in California. Through participatory exercises they became 'actors' in an experience which they had previously indicated in their journals that they had little power or influence. Through reenacting portions of the media's reporting of debates, classroom observations, editorials, and interviews, participating students actively processed and critically analyzed the events taking place and the ideas being presented.

The Warmup. Two exercises were used for the beginning of the student participation:

One of the students describes the process in her journal:

> We did two warmup exercises, the "Slow Motion Race" and "The Boxing Match". The responses to each exercise was different. The Slow Motion Race was not at all popular (for the spectators). The slowness of the activity itself, and the confusing experience for the spectators of cheering for the opposite of what they usually cheer for, created more than a little disequilibrium.

The description continues:

> Once we sat and discussed the warmup activity, all of us expressed concern over our response to the slow motion race as spectators. We seemed almost embarrassed that we hadn't enjoyed it more and were uncomfortable with what that would seem to indicate about our own place in an increasingly disengaged society. On the other hand, most of us would probably would like to think of ourselves as being 'above' enjoying watching an activity as passionate as boxing. Yet, there was no denying how engaged we became in the spectator observation. This actually made for a very nice transition into our analysis of the bilingual debate, where most people were much more involved as spectators rather than participants than they would like to admit.

Constructivist Modeling. Boal based his constructivist design on the literacy programs of Paolo Freire. He describes his approach to the organization of his activities as follows:

> There are many languages besides those that are written or spoken [i.e. music, painting, cinema, theater]. By learning a new language , a person acquires a new way of knowing reality and of passing that knowledge on to other language is absolutely irreplaceable. All languages complement each other in achieving the widest, most complete knowledge of what is real. (p. 121).

As Boal also states: "The spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action" (p. 130). When using his constructivist method with our students, the researchers found that action in participation in Boal's theater lead to two classroom constructs:

1. Participants were able to try out solutions to real-life problems and to discuss the transformational process for solutional change.
2. Participants began to talk of being "in training" for further and continual action to bring about change in their classroom environments and practice.

The following is an example of the modeling of a constructivist classroom using Boal. Three activities will be briefly discussed that represent different levels of participation by involved students.

1. Simultaneous Dramaturgy - This becomes "the first invitation made to the spectators to intervene without necessitating his physical presence on the stage' (p. 131). Students were invited to bring a classroom management situation from their elementary observation sites. The students had two choices for the performers who would act out the incident: 1) prepare a script before the class meeting; or 2) tell about the situation through a description immediately prior to the action.

The students usually chose the latter method. The volunteer actors listened to the "script" and also to subsequent suggestions from the audience about handling the situation. All possibilities that were suggested were attempted by the performers. A discussion followed presentations of solutions. The result, according to the students, became the opportunity to "discuss multiple solutions". The result, according to Boal, is that "the action ceases to be presented in a deterministic manner, as something inevitable, as Fate. Man is Man's fate" (p. 314).

2. Image Theater - The spectator is "asked to express his views on a certain

theme of common interest that the participant wish to discuss" (p. 315). The involved teacher preparation students discussed the current practices of bilingual education in elementary classrooms. The students expressed their opinions without speaking, using only their bodies. In the subsequent class discussions, the class then chose a portrayal of :1) an image that would show the group consensus of mutual opinion of current practice; and b) an ideal image describing the future of bilingual education - again without words. The students found that there also had to be a 'passage image - i.e., a transitional image - to demonstrate how educators could move from the current reality to the ideal. The students found that this forum allowed them "to analyze the feasibility of the change" (p. 139).

3. Theater as Discourse - Using the theater with teacher education students gave an opportunity to examine the teaching of literacy. A use of *newspaper theater* was used. The authors used "several simple techniques for transforming daily new items, or any other non-dramatic material, into theatrical performances" (p. 317). For example, the following was used:

• Rhythmical Reading - These readings described phonics instruction as reported in the newspaper. The students reread the articles in the rhythms of Gregorian chants, of rap, of samba. According to Boal, this rhythmic experience functions as a critical filter of the news. The students found this practice particularly interesting in representing the part that cultural filters play in understanding literacy teaching.

• Parallel Action - The actors pantomimed classroom actions for understanding the place of phonics in literacy as described by the newspapers.

• Reinforcement - The phonics information from the newspaper was used in accompaniment to photographs of classrooms, visual instructional materials, and other

curriculum aides and was presented silently.

In using Boal's theater as a basis for modeling the constructivist approach, the work of Elliot Eisner (1994) is also reflected in Boal's mirror:

> The ability to secure meaning in the course of our experience is a basic human need; we all want to lead meaningful lives, but meaning is not simply found; it is constructed. . . The presence of different forms of representations is a presence that activates, develops, and refines mind. In this sense, those of us in the field of education are in the construction business, and the environments and opportunities we create in our schools enable children in turn, to create, the kinds of minds they wish to own. (p. x)

Data Analysis

The constant comparative method of qualitative research was used to examine this entire process by the authors. Key issues and recurrent activities became categories of the focus. Data were continually collected that provided more incidents for the categories of focus, looking especially for the diversity of dimensions within each category (Glaser, 1978). Analyzing the emerging themes through coding and writing, the analysis became more focused on the core categories of the study. Fieldnotes, videotapes, and journals were the main sources of the qualitative data.

Based on the emerging themes generated by the co-participants, core categories that emerged in the study included the following:

"Can There Be Analysis Without Synthesis?"

"A Woolly Subject Can Lead to Woolly Thinking"

"Always Present Doubt and Not Certainty"

"Cultural Oppression Cannot Be Ranked"

"As Players, We Are the Subjects and Never the Objects"

Discussion of the Study

An introductory analysis of the history of participatory theater was important. The authors interpreted this beginning experience as reflecting what Boal had intended for his theatre to accomplish:

> The experience is revealing on the level of consciousness, but not globally on the level of action. . . The spectacle is a preparation for action (Boal, 1985, p. 155).

The active participation with Boal's ideas has continued in discussions with students after coursework was completed. The authors also have continued their own explorations within the development of course content. For example, in the reading and language arts methodology course taught by one of the authors, the students have become interested in the use of the theater to demonstrate the power positions of special interest groups relating to adult literacy classes in community settings.

One student teacher reported the successful use of Boal's chair activity - "The Great Game of Power" (1992, p. 150) - for a discussion of classroom power in her sixth-grade classroom. A table, six chairs and a bottle were used. Each participant took a turn to arrange the objects so that one chair became the most powerful object of all the objects represented. Once the most powerful arrangement was determined, one participant took the power position. Other members of the group then attempted to place themselves in the power position, taking away the power from the first person. Using this process, the dynamics between her student learning position and that of her students were clarified. From the resulting dialogue, a classroom management plan was collaboratively created.

Conclusion

The reflections continue. The theater process was powerful in allowing the participating students to look at their roles as spectators in the multicultural drama in schooling in which manipulation can still emerge as a major player.

Boal describes this initial process when he writes, "First, the spectator starts acting again"(1985, p. 119). Using such a thoughtful process could eventually become a natural and seamless part of a response-centered approach to life-long inquiry through encouraging the use of a participatory experience that explores questioning, finding solutions, and becoming an active part of the multicultural community called *school*.

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